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Research Paper

Miss Egley

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Audience: Ohio voting age population

Ohio School Funding

Cuts. A familiar word to the children of the Chardon Local School District in Ohio, used to describe reducing funds in different areas within the school system. Unfortunately, the term has become all too familiar within the Chardon School District. I have lived in this school district my entire life, and have attended Chardon Schools since kindergarten. The schools within the district, including four elementary, one middle and one high school, have to cut back when they cannot pass a levy to bring in more funds. The first time I remember hearing about a levy was in sixth grade. At the time, I did not fully understand what a levy was; I just knew that voters got to vote for it and our school really wanted it to pass. Many teachers were very concerned about what would happen if it did not pass. More recently, during my senior year, Chardon could not pass a levy in either November 2010 or May 2011. As a result, the budget was redone, and cuts were made. Chardon had to raise “pay to play” for sports from $50 to $225, a drastic change that discouraged some kids from playing sports at all. In the same year, many teachers were cut, including one math teacher, an art teacher and physical education teacher from the high school, two business education teachers, and one intervention specialist. These possible teacher cuts were announced in February 2011, and because the levy did not pass in May, the schools were forced to make them (Fertal). Unfortunately Chardon is not the only school in this tough position. Schools are put in this position because of lack of funds from the state.

The Chardon Local School District is just one among many in Ohio that is being forced to make drastic cuts because of low funding. The current funding of public schools in Ohio is a combination of state, federal, and local funds. The federal funds account for only 8%, whereas the state and local taxpayers account for 46% each (Benson). The amount of state funding that each school district receives is determined by a number of different factors. First, the state calculates what they think is the cost per student of a basic education. This amount is called the foundation amount. In 2009, it was determined to be $5,732 per pupil (Benson). Next the state determines how much of the foundation amount each district should be able to pay before receiving government funding. The state government does not have enough money to fund the total foundation amount for every school. For a small school of just 500 students, the foundation amount would total $2,866,000. In Ohio public schools, the total number of students is 1,840,390 (EducationBug). If the state government paid the foundation amount for every student in the state, they would pay $10,549,115,480. Because the government does not have this much money, they try to determine which districts are capable of coming up with their own money and which are not. The state then provides more funds to the districts where there is a low property wealth. There is always a guarantee that a district will not receive fewer funds than they did in the previous year. Each school district also gets a very small amount of funds from the Ohio lottery. The lottery accounts for only about 7% of all state funding (Benson).

Almost half of school funding comes from local funding. The local funds for schools mainly come from property taxes, but many districts use a levy to generate additional funds (Chardon Schools). Levies are placed on the ballot and then voters decide if they want to pay and support the schools. There are different kinds of levies, some of which are set at a specific dollar amount that the school district needs, and others that are based on millage rates. Local property tax rates are computed in mills. One mill would be one dollar out of $1,000 (Chardon Schools). “Inside” millage is money levied without the vote of the public. This type of millage is described in the Ohio Constitution and cannot go above 10 mills. “Outside” millage is the tax rate that the voters get to decide on (Citizens for Chardon Schools). A millage rate tax would state the rate, and then the amount that each person would pay would be based on that percentage of their property.

According to Schoolfundingmatters.org, “Ohio school districts place more operating levies on the ballot than in any other state - by some estimates, 10,000 levies since 1975. One of the main reasons districts must go back to voters so often is an aspect of Ohio law known as House Bill 920.” House Bill 920 is a provision that limits how much money can be generated from a property tax (Benson). The law was designed to prevent inflation for the taxpayers; however, it affects levies negatively because the taxpayers only pay what their property was worth at the beginning of the levy and their payments do not go up with inflation of their property. School district expenses rise with inflation, but because of House Bill 920, their income does not. Then they end up short on money and need to make cuts or ask the voters for another levy. This is known as “phantom revenue,” because the state calculates the amount that the district is expected to contribute using the growth, but the districts do not actually get that money because of House Bill 920 (Benson).

Many things add to the expenses of public schools. Not only do schools experience inflation in goods and services, but they also have to pay for unfunded mandates, state requirements, and requirements for children with disabilities (Chardon Schools). For instance, it is required by Ohio law that schools provide busing for students who live two or more miles from the school. Of course, the school must pay for the buses, the bus drivers, and the gas. Consequently, the school experiences an increase in gas prices along with everyone else. The only way a school can cope with inflation is by receiving a higher income, which is not possible unless state funding increases or local tax revenue increases.

Districts like Chardon get less money from the state because they are wealthier. But then they do not have enough money to operate in the way that they want, so they put a levy on the ballot. Especially now as some people are still recovering from the recession, many voters do not want an increase in taxes, so they do not vote for the levy to pass. Thus, the school does not get money. This is not just a problem for Chardon local schools. “In the past five years, more than 1,000 levies were proposed and about half passed,” according to schoolfundingmatters.org. These school districts that cannot pass levies are forced to make cuts. Among other things, they have to cut or reduce teachers, classes, and busing (Chardon Schools).

In 1997, the educational funding system of Ohio was declared unconstitutional by the Ohio Supreme Court (Ohio Education Matters). The court had previously said that if the school was receiving so little revenue that the children were being deprived of their education, then it was unconstitutional. The court suggested reforms such as not relying so heavily on property tax. But then again in 2000 the court ruled the funding unconstitutional again (National Education Access Network). The funding for Ohio schools has been an ongoing problem that no one seems to have the answer to.

The Ohio government has tried to implement various plans to improve funding for schools. They recently enacted the Ohio-Evidence Based Model as a part of the 2010- 2011 state budget in. The plan will be gradually phased in over ten years. The model is meant to “reduce the reliance on local taxpayers,” by raising state funding to 60% of the total funding of schools (Ohio Education Matters). A new group called the Ohio School Funding Advisory Council is planned to be started to “continuously review and update the funding formula.” (Ohio Education Matters) With the new council and new funding plans, the state government is hoping to change school funding for the better.

Public schools in Ohio are going to keep getting worse and worse unless a change is made. Many districts cannot survive on just the funding from the state. Right now, passing a levy is their only option. Unfortunately for some, like Ledgemont local schools who have tried in six consecutive elections, the levies do not pass (Scott). Ledgemont has already cut 16.5 teachers and four bus routes, and has closed their school libraries (Scott). If they cannot pass a levy soon, they plan on reducing classes offered to the state minimum, and raising their “pay to play” for sports to $500 (Scott). How bad does it need to get for voters to vote YES? It cannot get much worse. Schools need to be able to rely less on voters and levies and more on guaranteed state funding. Ohio should look at what different states do so they can improve their schools and school funding.

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